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ABSTRACT

This presentation focuses on honesty as an ingredient in the creative process of artists. Several suggestions resulted from this research: (1) the product of the creative process is about something; it has a referent, and this referent involves the artist's personal vision of world and self; (2) the honesty is not a recitation of factual reality but of an invented reality; (3) since there is a task and a goal, the creative process is a timely process; (4) the creative process is intentioned; honesty and truth are basic criteria; (5) the artists see honesty as more central than, for example, originality and craft; and (6) honesty for the artist involves a sincere commitment to a task, a willingness to face its requirements. (TA)

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Honesty as a Structurally Necessary Aspect of the Creative Process

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Psychologists don't use words like honesty and truth very often when they describe basic psychological processes. The words are difficult to define, almost guaranteed to make a metaphysical mess of things. One rare exception was Max Wertheimer (1959). In his discussion of what he called "productive thinking", he wrote:

> the feature of straightness, honesty, sincerity does not seem peripheral in such a process...even seemingly mere intellectual processes involve a human attitude, the willingness to face issues, to deal with them frankly, honestly, sincerely....

The essence of what I have to say to you today is that creative artists frequently use words ~~with~~ like honesty and truth in describing themselves at work; they contrast these ~~like~~ with lies, faking, being glossy; they feel that honesty and truth are at the core of what they are doing in art.

My primary data consist of three interviews: one with a short story writer, one with a composer, one with a poet. All three teach at Sarah Lawrence College and all three have achieved artistic recognition. Grace Paley's book of short stories, The Little Disturbances of Man received considerable critical acclaim and her stories have appeared in many major magazines. Jane Cooper won the Lamont Poetry Prize for her book, The Weather of Six Mornings. Joel Spiegelman, once a student of Nadia Boulanger, is internationally known and played. All three are actively engaged in the arts now, and all three have held foundation grants.

The interviews were conducted by five inexperienced interviewers; four undergraduates and me. There was no prearranged set of questions nor a scheduled order of topics. But there was a corpus of common reading and discussion among the interviewers. The students were from my psychology of creativity class in which we read and discussed works by Freud, Jung, Schachtel,

Kris, Kubie, Maslow, Maltzman, Mednick, Guilford, Arnheim, Barron, Roe, Getzels and Jackson, Wallach and Kogan - and Max Wertheimer. (I should add that the students were quite skeptical of the Wertheimer passage on honesty. Honesty, sincerity, commitment to the truth could be judged to be desirable personal characteristics, the students said, but they could not be requirements of a cognitive process. An insincere person could arrive at creative solutions in art, in science and in life.)

The subject of honesty or truth came up several times in each interview. Sometimes it was in answer to a direct question, but just as often it was in the context of a very different question. The verbatim answers were much richer than any summary of them could be, so I'll quote directly from the interviews.

First, Grace Paley. We were discussing one of the stories in which she said she was writing about a boy who was trying to be a "good and creative" person. Someone asked whether she thought the words were synonomous. She said no, but that people who want to be good interest her very much. Now I'll quote exactly.

> Question: Then there's no morality that seems to underlie creative people.
>
> Grace Paley: It's the morality of telling the truth. That has to be the prime and only thing. To be an artist is to have an absolute compulsion to tell the truth. Some people just want to be writers. That's different already. It's not the same thing at all.
>
> Question: Did you want to be a writer?
>
> Grace Paley: Yes I did. I really wanted to be a writer.
>
> Question: Did you think you'd do it all your life?
>
> Grace Paley: I just assumed I would. I couldn't seem to do anything else...(Then she ~~gives~~ gave a bit of

personal history and then she said:) I always did think I was a writer, and though I thought of myself as a writer, it was only when I hit that thing, which was not when I was young -- it wasn't until I had developed this absolute compulsion to know the truth somehow, to deal with it, that I really considered that I became a writer dealing with it at all, or that I wrote decently.

She told us that she hit on this when she wrote her first story - prior to that she had written only poetry. Here is how she describes it:

I remember sitting there and writing and every sentence I wrote I would say to myself 'But is that so?' And this includes sentences you would probably consider description of sunlight or something like that, but it's as though I simply had to know exactly what was happening. I had to put it down. The interesting thing in creation there, and one that I really can't help you with, is that from this truthtelling business there is a big jump to inventing the truth. Because that character was modelled on someone absolutely. That's the only one. After that I never did it again. I never had to.

Question: You knew you were telling the truth?

Grace Paley: But I had to...that's sort of the way I edit, I go back over things. Finally, in the last revision, where I have the word 'very' and I realize it's not true -- it wasn't really very cold, it was cold. I'm just trying to show you how nutty one can become in this and how determined to be faithful to some invented reality.

Later in the interview someone asked:

Do you really think it is possible to teach writing and she answered 'You just bug people into telling the truth. You hit them over the head for their lies.'

Jane Cooper, the poet, brought up the issue of honesty in several different contexts. At one point she spoke of some early unpublished poems. Someone asked whether she would publish them now and she said that she

would not because "I don't have those things to say anymore". Then she spoke of the violence and the mechanistic imagery in those poems and the use of effects which she now considers flashy and dramatic. And then she said:

> That would be another reason why it would be hard to go back to those old poems, because I don't really so much like the self that wrote them. I certainly don't like the imagery they used, though I don't at all feel they were dishonest poems. ~~In write them at the time was not dishonest; to publish them now would be.~~

(To write them was not dishonest, to publish them now would be.)

In a later portion of the interview, Jane Cooper brought up honesty again. She was telling us that her impression was that most artists were interested in more than one of the arts, but that it is love of the medium that determines what kind of artist a person becomes.

And then she added:

> I also think very much that...we make ourselves, that is, if you are really honest in your life and really keep working, everybody in a sense sooner or later has something to say. I mean I'm not knocking invention, but I do think that also there's a lot to be said for cumulatively confronting your experience and that one after awhile will acquire personality.

One of the interviewers asked Jane Cooper to say a little more about what she meant by being honest. And she answered:

> We all know middle aged poets who are sort of glossy; they're facile still and it seems to me they are living on their craft. They're not confronting what their lives are. I both agree with Auden that you want to be terribly aware of words that this is perhaps what distinguishes a writer as a young person. I also think you don't become an artist just by that.

In another part of the interview she was asked how one teaches poetry writing and Jane Cooper answered:

> You speed up the process of self-criticism. The experienced

> teacher or writer can say 'In this unlikely line you really have something that you can develop or that is yourself'.and in that sense speed up self-awareness.

The theme of confronting experience honestly, of being oneself in the work came up again in a discussion of criticism - that very perceptive criticism can affect the poet. When asked why she said:

> One does use one's life, not just in terms of history, not just just in terms of events, but in terms of alot of fairly subconscious material you know, or material that passes from the subconscious into the conscious. (Then she spoke of her shyness in using terms like subconscious in front of psychologists - but then she said:) but if you for instance start a poem which is all about your dreams and you find out that it's not the dreams you had to talk about but something that the dreams grew out of as the poems grew, you're obviously dredging pretty deep and that's much more autobiographical in a true sense than anything that happens to you.

The notions of truth, of expressing an idea honestly seems most puzzling in music. So one of the questions we asked Joel Spiegelman was what music was. He answered:

> It's something you live so close to. There's something about it and when you find it, it gives me the reason to live.
>
> Question: What is music to you?
>
> Joel Spiegelman: To me, the music is...the music that really counts is the inner music...I'd better explain...it's not the surface music. It's not what we hear on the surface. I'm thinking of something that's really more cosmological than technical. It's not that a passage sounds beautiful that really moves you - fine - it's what really moves me - is - is the - the inner beauty of the relationships and the logic of that, together with the sensual aspects that forms a complex, a constellation.

We don't have representation of the world and self in any direct way and yet in a sense we do. Here is the answer to a question about whether there is one theme that keeps recurring in his work:

I can't do anything unless I mean it. By meaning it, I have a way of saying it. The way evolves with time, with new insight. But I have noticed in myself going back over, my looking in my own early work - certain neoclassic works - certain traditional aspects, student works - a certain nice - a certain quality - and I would call it a quality of gesture, a kind of impulsive or impetuous kind of quality... sometimes it just takes the form of a few little notes - or just a short little phrase, or a little twist and irregardless of style that my own music has moved, those things seem to be there - they're like little sunbursts - they come out in different ways but they're there just the same. That goes for other people too. It's a kind of quality, the you coming out. That's the hardest thing to find for an artist - what is really you - that is you and isn't anyone else. It may be very modest. It may be that little thing - it may be that personal gesture.

Question: When you are working on an idea, is there a feeling of truth in a certain idea or solution?

Joel Spiegelman: Yeah, there's a feeling of rightness or wrongness, the rightness of this idea in terms of ...it's always in terms of what's come before and what you expect will come afterwards, the juxtaposition of the immediate situation...on a horizontal plane and how it works vertically with the other texture.

Later there was a discussion of modern music and someone asked Joel Spiegelman "Can you distinguish the quality of music?" and he answered:

It's very hard because we live so close to it, but I think we're getting better at it. We can distinguish the fakers and those that are really good.

Still later, there was a discussion of why a person composes and Joel Spiegelman said:

You are extending your body and mind in a way that you can do in no other way...if you are sincere about it. The moment of truth when you are doing it...it's that reaching out, your emotions and your head... working together...

Question: An extension of self?

Joel Spiegelman: Kind of. That's why it's hard to

> look at your own composition, sometimes, your works as objectively as one should, because it's looking at the mirror and you don't see yourself as others see you, you see yourself as you see you. It's a very strange thing.

Joel Spiegelman speaks of composing as a moment of truth, of his music as a mirror of himself. Jane Cooper speaks of writing poetry as honestly confronting one's experience. Grace Paley speaks of becoming an artist the day she discovered an absolute compulsion to tell the truth.

Those are the data. The difficulties of understanding and defining a quality such as honesty remains a puzzle and as psychologists, we have to struggle with it. Still, I think it is important that we take seriously what the artists say, that we cannot simply dismiss the result as an interesting, peculiar bit of verbal behavior of three artists. For one thing, other artists have been observed making similar statements. Van Gogh, Faulkner, Ezra Pound and John Keats are just a few. It is an idea that seems to cut across time and medium. In addition, the use of the terms like honesty and the context in which artists use them suggest something about the creative process itself.

This is what it suggests to me. First, it suggests that the product of the creative process is <u>about something</u>, it has a referent, and the referent is something like the artist's experience of life, his personal vision of world and self. The referent is not clearly there in the beginning - a self or an idea sitting there waiting to be expressed. Self-expression is not just a matter of spontaneity. It is a struggle to confront one's experience honestly. It cannot be done except in a medium, and when the expression in a medium is finally clear, the artist has discovered something. (Another thing Grace Paley said was that she writes, not when she is moved by an event but when

"something bufaloes her". Jane Cooper talked about discovering in a poem something you didn't know you had to say. Joel Spiegelman speaks of reaching out, of extending yourself and of the difficulty of discovering the you.)

Second, though honesty to experience is seen as a goal, the relation between the work and experience is not obvious. The honesty is not a recitation of factual reality (Faulkner says truth doesn't have much to do with the facts) but with an invented reality. Is the truth a metaphysical truth, a symbolic truth? This raises a whole set of fascinating questions. Furthermore, all three artists speak of dishonesty and lies and fakery in terms of form as much as content. The use of a glossy phrase or dramatic effects, the failure to work out an idea in terms of what comes before or what comes after, even the use of the word "very" where it doesn't belong - each is some sort of dishonesty and has to be rooted out.

Third, since there is a task and a goal, a something to be expressed honestly, the creative process (at least in the arts, but I think also in most living cases) is a process that takes place in time, not in seconds or minutes but weeks and years. Psychological analyses of creativity have used many different temporal units. Some study the word associations that occur within seconds; others, the problem solving that takes place in minutes; others describe creativity in terms of a total lifetime lived openly, lovingly, and without neuroses. However, in terms of art, in terms of the making of something, we are dealing with a long but finite temporal process with a beginning, a middle, and an end when the goal is reached.

Fourth, the creative process is an intentioned process. Although some parts of it may involve making conscious what has not been conscious

before, the artist cannot write a poem or paint a picture without intending to do it. It takes too much time, it is too complex a task to do without intention. The artist must recognize himself as someone engaged in making something, and he must commit himself in terms of time and resources to his task. Furthermore, it involves the artist's selecting some of his ideas, insights, and inspirations and rejecting others according to his own criteria. The artists told us that honesty and truth were basic criteria.

Fifth, the artists see honesty as more central than other characteristics that are frequently mentioned as typical of creative work: originality and craft. All of them had respect for both, all spoke of the discipline needed to master the medium and of the fun and delight in invention - but somehow the core was honesty. Other artists have also said similar things. Marianne Moore was quoted as saying "Originality is a by-product of sincerity". Ezra Pound said "Technique is a test of sincerity." The words suggest that originality and craft are necessary tools for the basic task of honest statement. We can even see the oft cited qualities of preference for complexity and tolerance of ambiguity as characteristics that are necessary because the basic task, the basic goal requires an honest struggle through complexity and ambiguity without compromise or oversimplifying.

Finally, some thoughts on honesty itself - in productive thinking, science, and art. The honesty which is the standard for the artist is a little different from the honesty Max Wertheimer spoke of in Productive Thinking (though I don't think he would disagree with what follows). Wertheimer was talking about a sincere commitment to a task - willingness to face its requirements. Even the cliched ruthless confidence-man who cleverly devises ways to ~~buck~~ trick people out of their money must honestly face the requirements

of his task: understanding the behavior of different kinds of people, being aware of how others see him, etc.

In the scientific enterprize, honesty itself is one of the requirements. No matter what a scientist's philosophy of science - ultimate truth or a heuristic theory, he may not lie about his observations. If discovered lying, he would be ostracized by the scientific community, as Bronowski (1956) points out. The artists seemed to be telling us that there is an analogous requirement in the arts, a commitment to express in a concrete form, in a medium, a personal vision which combines thinking and feeling, a view of the world and understanding of self. They say that the work must be honest to this vision as the reporting of data in science must be honest to what the scientist observes. How the artist develops his standard, how he ferrets out his lies, how he dredges deep for his truth - these are unanswered questions. The scientist's data are potentially public. But the artist's data are private. The truth or falseness of the finished work, the empirical product, cannot even be easily known, may never be known. Yet I think we need to take seriously, to be informed by what the artists told us: that in terms of process this is the standard they use for themselves - not cleverness, or skillfulness in using the medium, for originality. Their standard is honesty.

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